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CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

(Oct. 9, 1835–Dec. 16, 1921)

By J.-G. PROD'HOMME

THE ultimate glimpse I had of Saint-Saëns was on November 5, 1921, at one of the five o'clock musicales given by the "Master" Widor, Perpetual Secretary of the Academy of Fine Arts, in the *pavillon Decaen*, at the Institute of France. There Widor had installed his organ, and it was upon this organ that Camille Saint-Saëns played—if not in public, at any rate before a numerous assemblage of academicians, artists and music-lovers, accompanying several instrumental numbers of his own composition; with the exception of the Beethoven C major Quartet, the little concert was entirely devoted to his works.

The Master, who had just celebrated his eighty-sixth birthday, left one month later for Algiers, with the intention of there taking up his winter quarters, as had been his custom in preceding years, at the Hôtel del'Oasis. There was not a sign, either in his playing, as vivid and precise as ever, or in his personal bearing, that might have led one to anticipate that death, which so long had spared him, was soon to carry off, almost furtively, the composer of the *Danse macabre* on an Algerian night.

Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns was born October 9, 1835, not far from the dome of the Institute—which as a Parisian child he soon came to regard as a landmark—in a little street in the quarter of the École de médecine, one which, despite a century of modernization, still preserves an air of the Paris of former days, the rue du Jardinnet. By a strange coincidence, his teacher and friend, Charles Gounod, was a child of the same quarter, coming into the world some seventeen years before Saint-Saëns, a few hundred feet away, in the square of Saint-André-des-Arcs.



Saint-Vaïs
1893

BENQUE, 33, RUE BOISSY D'ANGLAS. PARIS.

An absurd fable, of unknown origin, and one which has been spread about especially during the past few years, pretends that the name Saint-Saëns (a name borne by a village in the Department of the Seine-Inférieure) was a pseudonym adopted by the composer in order to conceal a Hebrew patronymic, Kohn. Nothing could depart further from the truth: Saint-Saëns' father, Joseph-Victor Saint-Saëns, was a native of Dieppe, an assistant chief of bureau in the Ministry of the Interior, and his mother, Clémence Collin, came from Champagne. One of his uncles, who died in 1835, the Abbé Camille Saint-Saëns, was officiating priest at Pollet, near Dieppe. A poet on occasion, Victor Saint-Saëns died on the thirtieth of December, some three months after the birth of his son, who was first brought up in Corbeil, and later, when about two years old, taken to Paris. His aunt, whom he called grandmother, and his mother soon set him to work at the piano. "When no more than thirty months of age," he himself has written, "I was introduced to a miniature piano. Instead of striking the keys at random, as is the habit of children at that age. I struck them one after another, not removing my fingers until the sound had died away. . ." At the end of a month the *Le Carpentier Method*, much in vogue at that period, no longer held any mysteries for him, and in a short time little Camille had become a veritable infant prodigy, like a Mozart or a Beethoven. Entrusted at the age of seven to famous teachers of that day, Stamaty, a good pupil of Kalkbrenner, and then to Maelden, he was thirteen when he entered the Conservatoire where Benoist was his instructor in piano and Halévy in composition. Yet he had already been heard, before the Revolution of February, 1848, at the court of the Citizen-King; and before the Parisian public, in the Salle-Pleyel, on May 6, 1846. Fifty years later, in the same hall, he was to repeat the identical programme of his first public concert. In 1849 he appeared in the concerts of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire.

Saint-Saëns was one among the great French musicians whose road to fame did not lead through the Villa Medici: twice, during an interval of twelve years, he competed unsuccessfully for the Roman Prize; but Lucien Cohen and Victor Sieg were preferred to him. In the meantime he had become titular organist of the church of Saint-Merry, a position he relinquished in 1858; the organ at the Madeleine was then entrusted to him, and this post he did not resign until 1877.

Professor at the Niedermeyer School of Religious Music from 1861 to 1864—among his pupils were Gabriel Fauré, Messager,

and the organist Gigout—he now possessed a serious reputation as a virtuoso and improvisator; yet as a composer he was appreciated only in certain rather limited artistic circles. Fame, and eventually glory, were a long time coming to him, and the fact is easily explained. When we recall the French musical mentality toward the middle of the nineteenth century, it is scarcely surprising that a musician who by education and predilection cultivated and played classic music; who knew the works of Bach, Handel, Mozart and Beethoven as did none among his contemporaries; and who, above all, was a partisan of Berlioz, of Liszt and of Gounod (then much discussed), and later of Wagner, the unknown; it is scarcely surprising that such a musician must have appeared strangely eccentric to the public of that day, for whom chamber music and symphonic music were, so to say, a dead letter. His reputation as an organist and a pianist was established; yet it is common knowledge that nothing is more difficult for a virtuoso than to win recognition as a composer from the great general public, especially if he does not cultivate the dramatic stage (and such was the case with Saint-Saëns, until 1872). Fortunately, where he was concerned, a kindly fate endowed him with a longevity beyond the ordinary and, after some forty years had gone by, made it possible for him to enjoy a glory which had not been usurped, but rather slowly conquered, thus enabling him, so to speak, to survive himself.

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His output spreads over a period of some eighty years, and the complete catalogue of his works, once it has been set up, will in all probability comprise more than three hundred and fifty numbers. The oldest composition he wrote, in fact, bears the date of March 21, 1839 (it was written when the composer was no more than three years and six months old), his first romance, *Le Soir*, dates from May, 1841, and he published *Six Preludes* as late as 1920.¹

Esteemed and honored from his youth on by masters such as Berlioz, Gounod and Liszt—the latter encouraged him to write his symphonic poems—it was not until after he had reached the age of thirty-five that Saint-Saëns essayed the musical drama. Yet even before, this original genius had presented, either in concert or in church, various outstanding works.

¹TRANS. NOTE: A *Feuille d'album* for piano, dedicated to the Baronne Edmond de Rothschild, and three sonatas for flute and piano, clarinet and piano, and bassoon and piano respectively, appeared in 1921, the year of his death.

Gaining the second prize for organ in 1851, and the first prize the year following, he composed his First Symphony at this time (it was performed by the Société Sainte-Cécile, conducted by Seghers, on December 18, 1853). His Second Symphony (not published until 1877) was written in 1859. He also wrote songs (*Réverie, l'Attente, Lever de la lune, Plainte, la Cloche*), a Mass (1856), a First Concerto for piano, and a "Christmas Oratorio" (1858). His First Trio dates from 1860; his Second Concerto for piano, in G minor, from 1854. "What originality, what vitality, what force, movement, color abide in this work, which deservedly has become the composition of its kind most played in these days," Professor Isidor Philipp wrote of it. "Fifty years have passed since it was written, and it is as full of youth and vitality as in the first day it was set down."

A little later, for the Exposition of 1867, Saint-Saëns composed a cantata, *Les Noces de Prométhée*, which bore off the competitive prize instituted for this occasion. There were four hundred competitors, and Berlioz, who was a member of the jury of award, wrote, after the verdict had been rendered: "I hastened to him the good news. Saint-Saëns is a master pianist, of fulminating power, and one of the greatest musicians of our epoch." Berlioz also said of him: "He is a great pianist, a great musician, who knows his Gluck almost as well as I do," when he had Saint-Saëns rehearse Madame Charton-Demeur in the rôle of *Armide*, for a revival of Gluck's masterpiece at the Opéra, in 1866.

Wagner, for his part, with whom Saint-Saëns was acquainted at the time when *Tannhäuser* was being rehearsed in Paris (1860-61), said of him: "With an extraordinary velocity and a stupefying facility he unites a memory no less admirable. He played all my scores by heart, including the *Tristan*, without forgetting a single detail, and with such exactness that one might have sworn he had the music before his eyes." And the great Hans von Bülow paid him the same compliment.

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The first idea of an opera, or, rather, an oratorio, *Samson* (a subject on which Voltaire had versified a libretto which Rameau never set completely to music), harked back to the year 1868, and fragments of it, known to a few artists and friends, were sung by Augusta Holmès and the painter Henri Regnault before 1870; then by Mme. Viardot, on a little private stage at Bougival. It was not until March 26, 1875, however, the year

of *Carmen's* quasi-failure, that Colonne presented the first act to the auditors at his Concerts du Châtelet and we might quote what a critic (Henri Cohen) wrote of this performance a few days later in the *Chronique musicale*:

Before offering my personal opinion with regard to *Samson*, I must state that the opinion of the public was not favorable. Never has a more complete absence of melody made itself felt as in this drama. And when to this lack of melodic motives there is added a harmony at times extremely daring and an instrumentation which nowhere rises above the level of the ordinary, you will have some idea of what *Samson* is like.

The everlasting reproaches addressed to the innovator! One can understand that after having read verdicts as arbitrary as this, no dramatic manager, let alone the director of the Opéra—who, owing to the curiosity aroused by the new opera-house on the Boulevard des Capucines (the Opéra was formerly situated on the rue Le Peletier) was nevertheless certain of satisfactory box-office receipts, no matter what works he presented—felt tempted to stage this biblical drama.

It was not until two years later that Franz Liszt, great-hearted and generous, rescued *Samson* from oblivion once and for all by having it performed at the Weimar Opera (December 2, 1877). After that, coming by way of the Brussels' La Monnaie, the Théâtre des Arts of Rouen, and the stage of the *Château d'Eau* in Paris (1890), *Samson* was finally adopted by the Paris Opéra on November 23, 1892, with what success is generally known.

Up to that time neither *La Princesse jaune* (1872), nor *Le Timbre d'argent* (1877), composed before the preceding; nor *Etienne Marcel*, that episode of Parisian history which had been given in Lyons in 1879; nor *Henri VIII*, often but vainly recast and revived, even in later years (Paris Opéra, 1885); nor *Proserpine* (1887); nor *Ascanio* (Opéra, 1890, where it was revived in November, 1921); had been able to break the ice between Saint-Saëns and the operatic public. In the end, however, beginning with *Samson et Dalila*, this public made up its mind to recognize its composer as a dramatic musician. Nevertheless, despite the relative success of *Phryné* and, in a lesser degree, of the charming ballet *Javotte*, the composer of *Déjanire*, of *Hélène*, *Les Barbares*, and *l'Ancêtre*, never gained the popularity enjoyed by his fortunate rival Massenet as a composer for the operatic stage, and as a result honored the other with an ill-concealed enmity.

His own special public—one far more to be envied—was that of the concert-goers; and it is for this reason that all musicians, whether friends or enemies of the man or the artist, whether

Frenchmen or foreigners, have acclaimed Saint-Saëns as a great master, one of the greatest of the nineteenth century.

Hence he was known, like Berlioz, as a "symphonist," after having been no more than a pianist and organist, and this, in the eyes of the amateurs, amounted to a redhibitory vice. Yet there was still another reason, or there were other reasons, for these dramatic set-backs or semi-set-backs. Quite voluntarily and in all good faith, no doubt, Saint-Saëns, not alone as regards the stage, but elsewhere as well, did not sense the need of trying out new formulas: the historic subject, or the anecdotal subject, à la Scribe answered his purposes. Exceedingly well read and no wise ignorant of what was being done in his day, the day of militant and triumphant Wagnerism, he himself collaborated with his librettists. Hence, if he sinned, it was not through ignorance; he took the stand that a drama which had been lived, at any rate one within the historic probabilities, bears within itself a power of emotion quite as intense as a medieval or a Scandinavian theogony. Nevertheless, contrary to the practice of Meyerbeer and his emulators, Saint-Saëns was not given to those *hors d'œuvres* which have no connection with the dramatic action. The "Synode" in *Henri VIII*, the ballet and religious ceremony in *Samson et Dalila*, the mythological festival in *Ascanio*, for example, are episodes perfectly connected with the dramatic action of which they form an integral part, and not mere *divertissements de style*. Therefore it has been possible to approach Saint-Saëns to the great masters of former times, Mozart and Gluck, and to affirm, without undue exaggeration, that he did not allow himself to be influenced by the Titan and the tyrant of Baireuth.

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The foundation—on the morrow of the War of 1870-71—of the Société Nationale de Musique, almost exclusively dedicated to chamber music—in the beginning as it is to-day, for the organization of orchestral concerts was relatively quite as expensive in 1871 as in 1921—the foundation of the Société Nationale by the singer Romain Bussine and Saint-Saëns, who were joined by the composers Alexis de Castillon, Édouard Lalo and Ernest Guiraud, afforded younger French composers an opportunity of gaining a hearing for their works. The Société Nationale, whose motto *Ars gallica* indicated its trends and tendencies, offered them a species of laboratory for practical experiment. Nearly all of them, during the past half-century, have braved the public, some, alas!

to appear no more, others to begin a more or less brilliant career. Though Saint-Saëns had long ago resigned the presidency of the Société Nationale his memory was always kept green, and it, was at the Nationale that he gave the first auditions of the majority of his compositions for chamber music, among others the famous Septuor with piano and trumpet (1881); while at the Concerts Padeloup—Padeloup had played a Saint-Saëns' Scherzo for orchestra at one of his first concerts in the Cirque d'hiver—at the Colonne and the Lamoureux, as well as those of the Conservatoire, he presented the symphonic poems which established his reputation as a composer.

These were the *Rouet d'Omphale* (Padeloup, April 14, 1872); *Phaëton* (1873), *la Jeunesse de Hercule* (1877), and that *Danse macabre* (1875) which Colonne played, so the story runs, against the protests of his orchestra, but which was encored at the first hearing. Then came the symphonies, of which the most celebrated at the present time, as well as the most monumental, the Symphony in C minor, with organ and piano, originally played in London in 1885, was given in Paris by the Société des Concerts no more than two years afterward. Among other important symphonic compositions by Saint-Saëns more or less often played in concert, mention should be made of *La Marche Héroïque* (in memory of his friend, Henri Regnault, the painter, killed at Buzenval in 1870) first heard in 1871; the *Hymne à Victor Hugo* (1884); the "Christmas Oratorio," *Le Déluge* (1876), from which one violin solo in particular is played; *La Lyre et la Harpe*, cantata (1879), etc.

It is in absolute music, whether chamber music or symphonic, so Louis Vuillemin wrote not long ago that there should be found the best witness to a mastery beyond all discussion:

The Saint-Saëns' symphonies, notably the one in C minor with organ, are stylistic models. True to classic form, they extend it without doing much of renovation until the *finale* makes its appearance. His symphonic poems, on the other hand, better affirm the musician's personality. They instantly establish a genus: the 'poem for orchestra' has a legendary cast. As to the concertos for piano and orchestra, it seems to me that even more than anything which we have already mentioned, they characterize the composer's 'manner.' Radiantly wrought, ingenious in their instrumental disposition, often rich in the picturesque, they dominate the ensemble of the composer's works and, I believe, constitute their most original feature.¹

It might well chance that this may be the case, that it may sum up the judgment of posterity, to which the Master's works

¹*La Lanterne*, December 1, 1921.

now address themselves. As another of the "younger group," M. Roland-Manuel, has said:

Absolute music is much better suited to this somewhat rigid architect than is dramatic music. Terror and compassion are not his domain, rather a somewhat cold and decorative majesty. . . . It is the absence of this thrill, this something which Goethe terms *das Schaudern* (the shudder), which often prevents the immense talent of a Saint-Saëns from touching actual genius. Yet we must refuse to see in *Phaëton*, in the *Danse macabre*, in the Trio in A, or in the Symphony with organ, no more than the academic play of a polished, conventional and chilly art. No! Saint-Saëns is truly worthy of his mundane glory. The young composers, naturally inclined to disdain a member of the Institute who has not spared them his sarcasms, might at least listen to the fine lesson in conciseness and clarity afforded at every moment by the style of a musician who is anything but a pedant, but rather the most subtly ingenious of purists, the best advised of orchestrators, the most sagacious of tonal architects and, to best express it, the man of the world (as Claude Debussy testifies) who had the greatest knowledge of music.¹

Often, it is true, Saint-Saëns has been reproached by some with being too faithful to classic form, with sacrificing too much to its requirements, with being "too cold," or not sufficiently a "theatrical man"; while others, on the contrary, have praised him for the same reasons. He did not fail to explain himself a number of times on the subject. For him music, art, did not exist without form, the form evolved out of centuries of experience, in every branch of human activity. He did not refuse to recognize that form is, beyond all doubt, subject to variation according to its epoch; but that which he preferred was the classic form handed down to us from Greco-Roman antiquity, for it corresponded to his temperament, his education, his esthetic sense, that is to say, his feelings and sensibilities.

Saint-Saëns, too, contrary to the case of many French musicians of his own generation—and following ones as well—had benefitted by an advanced classical culture, a literary and scientific culture which his inquiring spirit, avid of knowledge, did not cease to maintain. This did not prevent him—quite the contrary—from sampling, on occasion, the art which was flowering all about him. It is only just to add, however, that he made a very moderate use of this privilege.

In a charming little book of *Souvenirs* which appeared recently, M. Camille Bellaigue quotes the following letter addressed to him by Saint-Saëns, in 1892:

Yes, I am a classicist, nourished on Mozart and Haydn from my tenderest infancy. I wished that it might be impossible for me to speak

any but a clear and well-balanced language. I do not blame those who do otherwise. Like Victor Hugo, speaking of certain poetic innovations, I find certain procedures good—for others.

The whole criticism, the auto-criticism of Saint-Saëns' work, is contained in these few lines. A classicist from infancy—a classicist, nevertheless, full of feeling for the great romanticists—his ponderate spirit, rather cold and reflective, steely and caustic, as quick in attack as in repartee, never lost itself in the vague mists of philosophy or metaphysics. His choice of subject in his symphonic poems and in his dramas sufficiently indicates the fact.

For the concert-hall as for the stage, the classic forms, or to be more exact, the traditional forms, the academic forms, augmented by the symphonic poem—which he has defined as “an ensemble of movements dependent one upon another, flowing forth from the original idea. . . which they enchain. . . forming a single composition”—sufficed him. At any rate, he conforms to their economy of means, their exterior arrangement, their “cut”; for, from the point of view of tonality, as a rule respected by the classic composers, Saint-Saëns permits himself great liberties, profits by an independence altogether modern. Aside from this—and this was a great deal in his day—he makes definite choice of simplicity for his guide, not blindly but consciously. His mind is made up to respect the established forms, because he does not think it expedient to do otherwise, because in them he sees a means which suffices for the expression of his thought. This thought is invariably clear, limpid, exempt from any too powerful outbreaks of feeling, without pretensions to forcing music outside the limits assigned to it by the ancients. He expressed himself with ponderation, often not without a certain “four-squareness,” yet with a distinction, an elegance which might be called haughty, and which does not exclude the use of means of expression of the most modern turn, or of original “finds”—always employed, however, with restraint. No musician was ever less the plebeian, that is certain, none less disdainful of cheap triumphs. And this is why, no doubt, for all that one can say his music is “very French”—which really amounts to saying nothing at all—Saint-Saëns' “success,” if success it were, was so long deferred. He was too purely, too exclusively a musician to obtain in a country like France the popularity awarded a Gounod or a Massenet.

Having essayed first, like the great masters of former times, all the musical forms, from the song (or the romance, as it was called in his childhood) to the symphony and the opera—it might be remarked, however, that although a pianist, he never composed a sonata for his instrument—he may be compared to them as regards his fecundity, the creative facility of which he showed himself possessed throughout his long career. To quote Pierre Lalo:

Like the composer of the *Noces*, and like the composer of "The Creation," he knew all without having learned it; from his youth on he enjoyed the possession of all his skill, all his sureness, all the resources of his technique. His first suite for orchestra, which he wrote at the age of sixteen, is set down with the same adroitness and the same infallible elegance which he had not lost seventy years later. Like his great protagonists, the faculty of production was inexhaustible in him. Like them, too, his musical gift was a universal one: there is no style nor form which he did not essay. . . . Like Haydn and Mozart, finally, he was almost altogether a musician; music was the focus and the all in all of his life. . . . He was not deeply stirred by any of the great mental or emotional movements of our time; no more than Haydn or Mozart in their day were stirred by the revolution which Goethe and his disciples wrought in German literature. Music, the profession and the art of music, occupied him altogether.¹

And the following line from the Preface of Saint-Saëns' *Harmonie et Mélodie*, which alludes to his changing opinions with regard to Wagner, might serve as the epigraph of all his own works: "In reality it is not I myself who have changed, it is the situation."

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This man, so profoundly, so completely the musician, was nevertheless not exclusively a musician—and this in itself is by no means the last original phase in his character. He, too, had his *violin d'Ingrès*² (he even had several) and he never failed to improve the opportunity of playing it, when the fancy took him. He was a poet, a librettist, a dramatic writer, philosopher, archeologist, astronomer, critic, journalist, humorist, tourist—and heaven knows what else!

A scholarly musician, it had been quite natural for him to write about his art, and he wrote about it largely. He had been, in former times, a contributor to the *Estafette*, the *l'Évènement*, the

¹*Le Temps*, December 18, 1921.

²*Violon d'Ingrès*—a hobby.

Voltaire, the *Nouvelle Revue* and, occasionally, to other papers and periodicals, and his articles for some ten years or so appeared quite frequently in the *Écho de Paris*. He collected a portion of this journalistic output in his *Harmonie et Mélodie, Portraits et Souvenirs, Charles Gounod et le "Don Juan" de Mozart*, in the *École buissonnière* (1913), in the *Germanophilie* (1916), and in a pamphlet on the theories of Vincent d'Indy, in connection with the latter's *Traité de Composition*.

Here and there he has expressed thoughts and ideas which, at first glance, often seem contradictory or paradoxical; yet which, nevertheless, do not depart from the logic of his own impulsive spirit. His eclecticism, says Jean Chantavoine, is

polemic eclecticism, a martial eclecticism, an aggressive eclecticism. He elects to praise a work and an artist at the moment when the work and the artist in question are unknown, unappreciated or disdained, Liszt or Wagner at the moment of Meyerbeer's triumph—Meyerbeer at the moment of Wagner's ascendancy. It is not vanity on his part, but generosity.

His enemies have not failed to attribute his anti-Wagnerian violences—the most recent of these were expressed in the *Germanophilie*, a pamphlet which appeared while the War was at its height—to his jealousy as a composer. It is possible, in fact, that there may have been a touch of egoistic feeling in the old musician's anti-Wagnerism; yet first and foremost it represents a patriotic exasperation, born of the events and which, carried to the pitch of purest chauvinism, leads him to rave.

Be this as it may, Saint-Saëns' printed works will long be read with profit; they have a place assigned them in every musical library, no less than have his engraved works, side by side with those of his friend Berlioz, whose stimulant and pleasure-giving quality they share; and they are no less characteristic of an epoch than are the Berlioz *feuilletons*, for their author might well claim, to use his own words, that he "had a certain right to the pretension of knowing something of the hidden springs and motive forces of an art in which he had had his being, from infancy on, like a fish in water."

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An amateur scientist, Saint-Saëns interested himself in philosophy, in natural history, in astronomy, in physics. His philosophy does not indicate that he possessed well-established convictions or a very coherent system: flexible and diversified,

like the composer's own character, it is no more than an honest man's pastime. Nevertheless, Saint-Saëns could not resist the desire to impart it to his contemporaries, and he tried to formulate it in his *Problèmes et Mystères* (1894), and in the Preface he wrote for a work by Dr. Regnault, *Hypnotism et Religion* (1897).

An uninterrupted chain, so he declares, exists between what we term matter and what we call spirit. To this confession of faith, which we might regard as the avowal of a materialist, our philosopher, however, opposes his belief in God, since "atheism is in very poor taste, owing to the rabble which denies God in order to free itself from all rules, and to have no other law than the satisfaction of its lowest appetites." Thus he professes deism. He confirms this confession elsewhere when he writes: "The proofs of God's existence are irrefutable. Opposed to them is no more than the fact that they lie without the domain of science and belong to that of metaphysics."

Now science has forced God backward: "At present He is in the depths of the infinite, intangible and inaccessible." Saint-Saëns, as a philosopher, therefore seeks to reconcile—after so many others have essayed the task—science and God. He actually—for a moment—believes it possible, for the tempest will end in "calm and harmony," though he forgets to tell us how this will be done.

In his Preface to *Hypnotisme et Religion*, where he thus struggles to find a conciliatory solution, he qualifies the Gospel, in passing, as "anarchistic," since its teachings tend toward "a suppression of labor, the weakening of character, and the division of property on pain of death." At once, however, he reassures those who might be alarmed by so unorthodox an audacity by telling them that the Gospel is only a "symbol."

Finally, he remains uncertain, while endeavoring to evade incertitude and—like the good Norman he has once more become—takes sides neither for science nor for religion, since "faith engenders intolerance and fanaticism, and finally mysticism, that renouncement of all which is not revealed religion." Nevertheless, as he is set upon having a *credo* of some sort, he wishes to replace faith arbitrarily by an "artistic faith"; on one condition, however, that this "artistic faith" be not of a certain school (the school in question is the Wagnerian one) which brings in its train "intolerance, fanaticism and mysticism." The artistic faith, hence, must be an eclectic one, not appealing to "any supernatural revelation, and not venturing to assert the affirmation of absolute verities. It is no more than a set conviction due in part to the

author's own studies, in part a result of his instinctive fashion of understanding the art which constitutes his personality, and which, therefore, he is compelled to respect. It has the right to persuade and conquer souls, but not that of violating them."

As may be seen by the few citations adduced, Saint-Saëns' philosophic *violon d'Ingrès* was pretty much out of tune. It calls for mention, however, since it reveals a little-known side of this investigating spirit which, even in speculations of this sort, was not deserted by the artistic idea.

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The physical and the natural sciences supplied another passion, another pastime, for Saint-Saëns. "A scholar" and a musician, he wrote at least once on the subject of acoustics and advanced some interesting observations. He published an article in the *Nouvelle Revue* in 1881, in which he expressed his surprise at the apparent lack of harmony between the vibrations of bells and the admitted laws of acoustics. Struck by the analogy existing between the phenomena of the various sources of light revealed by the spectroscope, and the phenomenon of the resonance of bells, he concluded that the apparent or seeming sound of a bell might be nothing else than a harmonic and not a fundamental, a harmonic tone attached to an actual fundamental one, the latter remaining inaudible because of its excessive gravity. This gravid observation, taken up again by the scientific acoustician Gabriel Sizes, has allowed the latter, after exhaustive researches, to formulate a law of vibration which may be applied to all known sonorous bodies.

Nevertheless, after philosophy it is not acoustics, but rather astronomy, which is the fairest flower in Saint-Saëns' scientific crown. A member of the Astronomical Society of France, he did not hesitate a moment to make a journey to Spain to observe the eclipse of the sun at Burgos, in 1905, as later that of 1911 in St.-Germain-en-Laye; he left several pamphlets and memoirs, one of which, entitled *La Vie dans l'univers*, in the shape of a letter addressed to Camille Flammarion, was published in 1902 in a bulletin of the Society. In 1906, Saint-Saëns published a study on the relationship between plants and animals in the *Nouvelle Revue*, in which he endeavored to prove an ingenious theory which was dear to him, the one, namely, that "the prototype of the vital evolution was the vegetal evolution," a theory calculated to appeal to his spirit of order and method. At the bottom of the

ladder of animated life he saw the plant, in the middle the animal, and on the topmost degree man, "an animal of more elevated order than the rest." He endeavored to discover a scientific basis for this construction, ordered along the lines of a classic symphony.

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Saint-Saëns' poetry does not scale these heights. As a versifier the musician contents himself with being an honest librettist—or a humorist. The author of two dramatic-musical parodies, *Gabriella di Vergy*, a satire on Italian music, he also wrote *La Crampe des écrivains*, *le Roi d'Apépi*, and a collection of *Rimes familières*, to say nothing of many little bits of verse scattered through his correspondence.

An indefatigable letter-writer, replying with good grace to the innumerable letters which reached him every day from all parts, writing to the newspapers when an article or some happening or other had aroused his interest, to give his opinions on questions altogether foreign to music, this correspondence, once it is published, will show how eager was the interest of his spirit, never dormant, in matters far removed from his art.¹

Saint-Saëns, in the capacity of an amateur archeologist, had been a member of the Academy of Fine Arts since 1881. On one occasion he read a paper before this body on "The Lyres and Citharas of Antiquity"; on another he communicated to his colleagues at the Institute a "Note on the Decoration of the Antique Theatre." And, in the course of numerous voyages, notably in French Africa and in Egypt, he took a genuine connoisseur's interest in the discoveries made by our scholars.

It was, no doubt, in order to recognize these various merits, no less than to honor the musician himself, that the University of Cambridge, in 1893, solemnly awarded Saint-Saëns the degree of *Doctor honoris causa*, at the same time conferring it

¹Saint-Saëns' hand-writing has been analyzed by a graphologist who has specialized in the study of the graphology of musicians, M. Vauzanges, and is no less characteristic of the man than of the artist. It indicates an intelligence of the first order, one very lucid, very open, animated and embellished by an imagination at once noble and meticulous; a clean-cut, vivid and impulsive spirit, remarkably active (the writing clear, rapid and, in part, juxtaposed), one which enjoys going to the bottom of things, and which assimilates with ease, at once creative and practical (the writing more connected than juxtaposed, and with abnormal connections between words, punctuation marks and letters). This hand-writing also discloses indications of a refined culture not habitually found save in the writing of literary men of great talent (numerous simplifications, typographical forms, etc.). The writer's taste is very fine, very delicate; his character good, his soul upright; his will power is gentle, regular, doubled by tenacity. The man, incidentally, is exempt from pride, yet conscious of his real value.

on Tschaikovsky, Boito, Max Bruch and a number of other notabilities. "At the head of the group of doctors," the author of *Souvenirs et Portraits* tells us, "marched the King of Babonagar, wearing a turban sparkling with fabulous gems, and with a collar of diamonds around his neck. . . . May I dare to avow that, an enemy of the drab and commonplace tones of our modern dress, I was enchanted by the adventure?"

The University of Oxford, in 1907, imitated the example of her younger sister, and Saint-Saëns on this occasion could number among his new colleagues the Duke of Connaught, Sir Edward Grey, Campbell-Bannermann, Glazounoff, Rudyard Kipling and Rodin.

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Very distant, owing, perhaps, more to timidity and through dread of the importunate than to haughtiness, legend has made the composer of *Samson et Dalila* a singular, fantastic eccentric, and as regards the "great public," which cares but little for music, Saint-Saëns was for a long time better known because of his long voyages than for his musical masterpieces. In reality his absences from France, which were renewed with every year for more than half a century, were necessary, as much because of his health, as by reason of his love for wandering. There was another reason, too, which induced him to flee from Paris—the world!

In 1878, amid circumstances peculiarly sad, he lost a little son, a boy of three, who accidentally fell from the balcony of the apartment in which his father lived, in the rue Monsieur-le-prince, into the street and was killed. The father, mad with grief, attributed this death to the negligence of his wife, whom (it is said) he refused to see again. That same evening he wrote her a single laconic word: "Farewell," which, on its face, was a definitive leave-taking. In reality, he lived with her several years longer before their separation.

Ten years later, toward the end of 1888, Saint-Saëns lost his aged mother, who had been the great love of his entire life. This time he left Paris as though with the intention of never returning. Giving up his old home in the rue Monsieur-le-prince, he offered all his beautiful furniture, all his artistic souvenirs, to his father's natal town of Dieppe, which has since created the Saint-Saëns Museum, whose treasures were continually added to by the gifts of its founder.

He visited Spain, and without the knowledge of any of his friends, even his librettist Louis Gallet, embarked for the Canary

Islands, while his *Ascanio* was being rehearsed at the Opéra; and the first performance was given during his absence. This run-away journey of the composer has remained celebrated in the annals of Parisian musical life. From that time on the legend gained ground that Saint-Saëns was never to be found in France. Having visited Egypt, to which he returned with predilection, Ceylon, Indo-China—not without returning several times to the Canary Islands, until 1900—Saint-Saëns at that time decided once more to try to take up his abode in Paris. He established himself in the rue de Courcelles, and there he remained until the end of his days. Thenceforth this man, who had for so long a time avoided the world, especially the musical world, reappeared in the concert halls, in the theatres, and no longer travelled as a mere tourist, but as a musician, an orchestral conductor and a virtuoso. He revisited London, where he was always fêted, went to Berlin, where the honors paid him are a matter of common knowledge, travelled in Italy, Spain, Monaco, and even in France itself.

After having celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his first concert in the Salle Pleyel (1846–1896), he did not disdain from time to time to appear on the concert stage, rousing the enthusiasm of his audience as soon as he made his appearance. In 1913 he gave his “last” concert in the Salle Gaveau: he would no longer be heard in public, at least so all thought. . . Then came the War, and he was once more in evidence, lending the support of his glorious name and his great authority to many a charitable or patriotic manifestation, both in France and abroad. He gave concerts as far away as the Argentine, and did not fear to cross the ocean when past the age of eighty. He brought back with him more than 100,000 francs for a highly interesting War charity, the *Fraternelle des Artistes*.

Under a somewhat dry exterior (says Ch.-M. Widor) he concealed an ardent soul and great warm-heartedness. How many widows, daughters and sisters of his old orchestral comrades did he not succor and pension! When a moment of ill-temper—and such occurred quite frequently—provoked a word on his part which he himself felt was too strong, he would immediately endeavor to undo whatever harm he might have done. He had a ‘temper,’ as he was wont to say himself, but this does not signify that he was evil-tempered.

In his writings (Widor continues) he was never guilty of attacks on his colleagues. If he had a little quarrel with Debussy, he was not the one who was to blame; and he was careful, incidentally, to refrain from divulging it to the public. . . As to the pride with which he has been reproached, it is certain that, gifted with the critical instinct, he could not ignore his own value, if only as a matter of comparison, and

that he was entitled to pride himself upon it. Nevertheless, is there not a singular modesty shown in his own judgment of his own works:

"Certain ones among my works will disappear. In our art they may be said to mark a time of pausation, like the repose which comes after a day of toil. Others will come who will profit by this labor, and will do better than I have done."¹

His works, numerous and diverse, reflect the mobility, the eclecticism of his nature, "not so say the versatility which drove him to devote himself completely to certain great masters, and then turn away from them without any valid reason; although a number of times, and always in vain, he has endeavored to explain away these violent contradictions, notably with regard to Wagner, Schumann and Brahms," says Adolphe Jullien in the *Journal des Débats* (December 18, 1921), not without a touch of sharpness.

This output, which we have done no more than trace in broadest outline—for in these pages we have been particularly interested in speaking of the man rather than of the universally known and appreciated musician—this "enormous and formidable" output of work, as Alfred Bruneau expressed himself at the tomb of Saint-Saëns:

harks back directly to the great classicists whose last descendant he was. Like them, he handled every kind of music with equal superiority. Was he not, he too, the Mozart of his epoch, the infant prodigy and the prodigious man? And he traversed all the roads of his art with equal sureness, whether exploring the immense and marvelous forest of sonority, whether lingering, stopping now and again, to cull a thousand delightful flowers of song. Tradition captivated him, allured him more than innovation. In defence of tradition, when he felt it menaced, he fought with vivacity, with courage, with extraordinary violence. Belligerent by temperament, as soon as a subject of discussion tempted him he seized the polemic pen and used it vigorously, furiously, daringly, handling it like some redoubtable and vengeful sword. If he would not consent, in his compositions, to change the customs established by his predecessors, if he refused to overturn the harmonic and melodic system which had been in use before his time, his creative rôle is nevertheless one of exceptional magnificence, his ardent leonine claw leaves an imprint comparable to none other on each of the scores which he wrote. *Samson et Dalila*, *le Déluge*, the Symphony in C minor, these three splendid peaks, and innumerable lyric and instrumental pages, have conquered a place in the admiration of the universe which they will retain as long as beauty endures, so long as orchestras and choruses assemble to move and charm us."²

¹*Le Gaulois*, December 23, 1921.

²Oration delivered at Saint-Saëns' funeral, December 24, 1921.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

A thematic catalogue of Saint-Saëns' compositions was published a few years ago, by the house which has put forth the majority of his works. A catalogue of his musical compositions as well as of his literary works may also be found in the *Musiciens français d'aujourd'hui*, by O. Séré, recently reprinted. Biographies of the Master have been written by G. Servièrès, in *La Musique française moderne*, by Bonnerot, Augé de Lassus, Montargis, Baumann and, in German, there is one by Dr. Neitzel. In addition, the studies and articles published by Ad. Jullien, Willy, Camille Bellaigue, E. Marnold, R. Rolland, Ad. Boschot, J. D. Parker (THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY, 1919) may be consulted.

(Translated by Frederick H. Martens)